

Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: Arthur & George

Author: Julian Barnes

Born January 19, 1946, in Leicester, England; son of Albert Leonard (a French teacher) and Kaye (a French teacher) Barnes; married Pat Kavanagh (a literary agent), 1979. Education: Magdalen College, Oxford, B.A. (with honors), 1968. Addresses: Agent: Peters, Fraser, and Dunlop Ltd., Drury House, 34-43 Russell St., London WC2B 5HA, England.

Name: Julian Barnes

Born: January 19, 1946

Education: Magdalen College, Oxford, B.A. (with honors)

Address: Peters, Fraser, and Dunlop Ltd., Drury House, 34-43 Russell St., London WC2B 5HA, England.



Career:

Freelance writer, 1972—. Lexicographer for *Oxford English Dictionary Supplement*, Oxford, England, 1969-72; *New Statesman*, London, England, assistant literary editor, 1977-78, television critic, 1977-81; *Sunday Times*, London, deputy literary editor, 1979-81; *Observer*, London, television critic, 1982-86; London correspondent for *New Yorker* magazine, 1990-94.

Awards:

Somerset Maugham Prize, 1980, for *Metroland*; Booker Prize nomination, 1984, Geoffrey Faber Memorial Prize, and Prix Medicis, all for *Flaubert's Parrot*; American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters award, 1986, for work of distinction; Prix Gutembourg, 1987; Premio Grinzane Carour, 1988; Prix Femina for *Talking It Over*, 1992; Shakespeare Prize (Hamburg), 1993; Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres; shortlisted for Booker Prize, 1998, for *England, England*.

Writings: Novels

Metroland, St. Martin's Press (New York, NY), 1980.

Before She Met Me, Jonathan Cape (London, England), 1982, McGraw-Hill (New York, NY), 1986.

Flaubert's Parrot, Jonathan Cape (London, England), 1984, Knopf (New York, NY), 1985.

Staring at the Sun, Jonathan Cape (London, England), 1986, Knopf (New York, NY), 1987.

A History of the World in Ten and One-Half Chapters, Knopf (New York, NY), 1989.

Talking It Over, Knopf (New York, NY), 1991.

The Porcupine, Knopf (New York, NY), 1992.

Letters from London, Vintage (New York, NY), 1995.

England, England, Knopf (New York, NY), 1999.

Love, etc., Knopf (New York, NY), 2001.

In the Land of Pain, Jonathan Cape (London, England), 2002, Knopf (New York, NY), 2003.

The Lemon Table, Jonathan Cape (London, England), 2004.

Arthur & George, Jonathan Cape (London, England), 2005.

Under Pseudonym Dan Kavanagh: Crime Novels

Duffy, Jonathan Cape (London, England), 1980, Pantheon (New York, NY), 1986.

Fiddle City, Jonathan Cape (London, England), 1981, Pantheon (New York, NY), 1986.



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Putting the Boot In, Jonathan Cape (London, England), 1985.

Going to the Dogs, Pantheon (New York, NY), 1987.

Writings: Other

(Contributor) Charles Hobson, *Flaubert & Louise: Letters and Impressions, Limestone* (San Francisco, CA), 1988.

Cross Channel (short stories), Knopf (New York, NY), 1996.

Something to Declare (essays), Picador (London, England), 2002.

The Pedant in the Kitchen (nonfiction), Atlantic Books, 2003.

Contributing editor, under pseudonym Edward Pygge, to *New Review*, c. 1970s. Regular contributor to *Times Literary Supplement* and *New York Review of Books*.

Media Adaptations:

Talking It Over was adapted for film in 1996; *Metroland* was adapted for film in 1999.

Sidelights:

"Julian Barnes," wrote *Dictionary of Literary Biography* contributor Merritt Moseley, "is one of the most celebrated, and one of the most variously rewarding, of Britain's younger novelists." His work, the critic continued, "has been acclaimed by readers as different as Carlos Fuentes and Philip Larkin; reviewers and interviewers sum him up with praise such as Mark Lawson's claim that he 'writes like the teacher of your dreams: jokey, metaphorical across both popular and unpopular culture, epigrammatic.'" In addition to novels such as *Flaubert's Parrot*, *A History of the World in Ten and One-Half Chapters*, and *The Porcupine*, Barnes has also won a reputation as a writer of innovative detective fiction and an essayist. "Since 1990," Moseley concluded, "he has been the London correspondent of the *New Yorker* magazine, contributing 'Letters from London' every few months on subjects such as the royal family and the quirkiest side of British politics." Barnes was also one of many writers—among them Stephen King and Annie Proulx—invited to read from their works at the first-ever New Yorker Festival in 2000.

Barnes published four novels, *Metroland*, *Before She Met Me*, and the detective novels *Duffy* and *Fiddle City*—both written under the pseudonym Dan Kavanagh—before he completed *Flaubert's Parrot*, his first great success. Critics have acclaimed these early books for their comic sensibility and witty language. *Metroland* tells the story of two young men who "adopt the motto *epater la bourgeoisie*," explained *New Statesman* contributor Nicholas Shrimpton. "But this grandiose ambition is promptly reduced to the level of 'epats,' a thoroughly English field-sport in which the competitors attempt to shock respectable citizens for bets of sixpence a time." "After this vision of the Decadence in short trousers," the reviewer concluded, "it is hard to take the idea of outrage too solemnly." *Before She Met Me* is the tale of an older man who falls into an obsession about his actress wife's former screen lovers. The book, stated Anthony Thwaite in the *Observer*, presents an "elegantly hardboiled treatment of the nastier levels of obsession, full of controlled jokes when almost everything else has got out of control."

Barnes's detective fiction also looks at times and characters for whom life has gotten out of control. The title character of *Duffy* is a bisexual former policeman who was blackmailed out of his job. "The thrillers are active, louche, violent, thoroughly plotted," stated Moseley. "*Duffy* shows the result of serious research into the seamy world of London's sex industry; in *Duffy*, as in its successors, the crime tends to be theft or fraud rather than murder, though Barnes successfully imbues the book with a feeling of menace." *Fiddle City*, for instance, takes place at London's Heathrow airport and looks at the smuggling of drugs and other illegal items.

It was with the publication of *Flaubert's Parrot*, though, that Barnes scored his greatest success to date. The novel tells of Geoffrey Braithwaite, a retired English doctor, and his obsession with the great French novelist Gustave Flaubert. After his wife's somewhat mysterious death, Braithwaite travels to France in search of trivia



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concerning Flaubert; his chief aim is to find the stuffed parrot that the writer kept on his desk for inspiration while writing *Un coeur simple*, the story of a peasant woman's devotion to her pet. Barnes "uses Braithwaite's investigations to reflect on the ambiguous truths of biography, the relationship of art and life, the impact of death, the consolations of literature," explained Michael Dirda in the *Washington Post Book World*.

Far from a straightforward narrative, *Flaubert's Parrot* blends fiction, literary criticism, and biography in a manner strongly reminiscent of Vladimir Nabokov's *Pale Fire*, according to many critics. *Newsweek* reviewer Gene Lyons called it "too involuted by half for readers accustomed to grazing contentedly in the best-seller list," but recommended it to readers "of immoderate literary passions." Other reviewers stressed that, while a complex and intellectual work, *Flaubert's Parrot* is also "endlessly fascinating and very funny," in the words of *London Times* contributor Annabel Edwards. Dirda concluded that this "delicious potpourri of quotations, legends, facts, fantasies, and interpretations of Flaubert and his work...might seem dry, but Barnes' style and Braithwaite's autumnal wisdom make the novel into a kind of Stoic comedy...Anyone who reads *Flaubert's Parrot* will learn a good deal about Flaubert, the making of fiction, and the complex tangle of art and life. And—not least important—have a lot of rather peculiar fun too."

Of Barnes's more recent works, *A History of the World in Ten and One-Half Chapters* and *The Porcupine* are probably best known to U.S. readers. *A History of the World in Ten and One-Half Chapters* "builds on Barnes' reputation as one of Britain's premier postmodernists," stated *Village Voice Literary Supplement* contributor Rob Nixon. "The anti-novel that emerges attempts to double as a novel of ideas—never Brit lit's forté...The principal concern of the novel, which begins with corruption on the Ark and ends in the tedium of heaven (pretty much like life with lots of shopping), is to debunk religion and that most seductive of theologies, History." Barnes conceives of history in the book as a series of different, mostly unrelated events, and the connections individuals invent to link them together. "One of Barnes's characters rather improbably describes her supposed mental condition—imagining that she has survived a nuclear disaster, which, as it turns out, she has—as 'Fabulation. You keep a few true facts and spin a new story about them,'" declared Frank Kermode in the *London Review of Books*. "This is what Barnes himself, in this book, attempts. He fabulates this and that, stitches the fabulations together, and then he and we quite properly call the product a novel." "As a 'historian,'" stated Anthony Quinn in the *New Statesman and Society*, "he is unlikely to dislodge Gibbon or Macaulay; but as satirist and story-teller he has few equals at present."

The Porcupine is a short novel set in a fictional Eastern European country in the post-Communist era. "Stoyo Petkanov, the former president, a cross between [former Rumanian premier] Nicolae Ceaucescu and Bulgaria's Georgi Dimitrov," explained *New York Times Book Review* contributor Robert Stone, "is on trial in the courts of the shakily democratic successor government." His prosecutor is Peter Solinsky, born into a family prominent under the Communists. Solinsky is shaken by Petkanov's sincere belief in the principles of Communism. Contrasting them with the poverty and lack of respect that the reforms have brought, Solinsky begins to turn away from his new democratic ideals. "In the end," Mary Warner Marien declared in the *Christian Science Monitor*, "nothing is resolved except a clearer vision of the stupendous obstacles facing the former communist country." "Admirers of the earlier, Francophile Julian Barnes may regret that in his latest work...the author of *Flaubert's Parrot* and *Talking It Over* has shed his brilliance and dandyism to become a rather somber recorder of his times," stated *London Review of Books* contributor Patrick Parrinder. "The grayness seems inherent in his subject-matter, but it has not infected his acute and spiny prose."

England, England, a darkly satiric novel set in the twenty-first century, incorporates conflicting world situations and their connectedness to greed for power and money. Protagonist and businessman Sir Jack Pitman plots to replace England with a replica island—a Disneyland-type fantasy world—intending to reap huge financial rewards. John Kennedy, writing for the *Antioch Review*, concluded that the book falls short because the characters are underdeveloped. Even so, he commended Barnes's writing style, adding that he "cleverly puts his finger upon a central issue: how do we find our personal uniqueness and salvation when 'memory is identity' and



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everywhere history and heritage are being manipulated for profit." Philip Landon, in the *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, dubbed *England, England* "a novel of downright Swiftian darkness and ferocity." Comparing the fantasy island to Lilliput, Landon called the work a "stinging caricature" that "chills with the bleakness of its cultural panorama."

Commenting on *Love, etc.* for *Yomiuri Shimbun/Daily Yomiuri*, a reviewer called Barnes a "sensitive writer, whose specialty is a down-to-earth lucidity about the sad paradoxes of love and marriage." *Love, etc.* is a ten-years-later look into the lives of the characters of *Talking It Over*, although reading the latter is not a prerequisite to enjoying the former. Steven Rea, reviewing the book for *Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service*, noted that *Love, etc.* "is penned in confession mode—in the voices of its protagonists, a knotty triangle of love, loathing, trust and betrayal known as Stuart, Gillian and Oliver." He called Barnes's prose "lively, lucid, ricocheting with wryly observed commentary on the human condition," adding that Barnes "pokes and prods into the dark corners of contemporary relationships." Dale Peck in the *New Republic*, however, found the writing clever but the story ultimately "soulless." As Peck explained, "Barnes is a terribly smart man, a terribly skilled writer...[but] intelligence and talent in the service of a discompassionate temperament are precisely the opposite of what one seeks from a novelist, or a novel."

In a departure from his longer fictional works, Barnes experimented with the short-story form in 1996's *Cross Channel*. A collection of ten short stories that span centuries, each tale is also linked by its depiction of a Brit heading for the far bank of the Channel, lured by the pleasures of neighboring France. Drawing on the similarities between the British and their Gallic cousins, Barnes's "imagination seems to work comfortably in a historical context, building fiction on bits of fact," according to Chicago's *Tribune Books* reviewer Bruce Cook. Among the stories—each set on French soil—are "Junction," which revolves around the perception of the French-born Channel-spanning railroad's builders' perception of their British co-workers during the railroad's 1840s construction. "Melon" finds a cross-cultural cricket match interrupted by the French Revolution, much to the dismay of the story's high-born protagonist who had hoped to sideline the populace's rush to rebel by sparking a far more healthy interest in sport. And in "Inferences," an older-than-middle-aged English musical composer now living in France awaits the performance of his latest composition on the radio, hoping to surprise his young mistress with its magnificence.

Slipping back and forth between the centuries, Barnes's "prose slips quietly back from its modern cadences into those of the early nineteenth century, into the cherished foreignness of the past," noted Michael Wood in a *New York Times Book Review* critique of *Cross Channel*. The author also slips back and forth between outlook, between the way the British view the French and vice versa, understanding the French perspective yet clearly aligned with the British. "*Cross Channel* reconfirms Barnes' sympathy for those characters whose Englishness accompanies them, like a sensible mackintosh, into the unpredictable depths of France," quipped critic Gerald Mangan in his review of the collection for the *Times Literary Supplement*. Praising the volume for its sensitive portrayal of a myriad of cultural subtleties, Cook had particular praise for the dry wit that imbues the collection. Barnes "may indeed be a comic writer at heart—and that may be why he appeals to French readers," surmised the critic. "His humor is the sort that translates well. It travels."

Returning again to the short-fiction format in *The Lemon Table*, Barnes combines eleven unique short stories that focus on individuals whose lives are connected through the unnerving themes of death and aging. As readers plunge into the lives of the characters, dark secrets are revealed, along with chilling answers to much-feared questions. Barbara Love in *Library Journal* called *The Lemon Table* a "superb collection" and added: "This is Barnes at his best." A reviewer for *Publishers Weekly* commented that the short tales "are as stylish as any of Barnes's creations, while also possessed of a pleasing heft...the reader is taken for a delightful ride."



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Further Readings:

Contemporary Literary Criticism, Volume 42, Thomson Gale (Detroit, MI), 1987.
Contemporary Novelists, 6th edition, St. James Press (Detroit, MI), 1996.
Dictionary of Literary Biography Yearbook, Thomson Gale (Detroit, MI), 1994.
Moseley, Merritt, *Understanding Julian Barnes*, University of South Carolina Press (Columbia, SC), 1997.
Sesto, Bruce, Language, History, and Metanarrative in the Fiction of Julian Barnes, Peter Lang Publishing (New York, NY), 2001.

Periodicals:

Antioch Review, winter, 2000, John Kennedy, review of *England, England*, p. 117.
Booklist, July, 1995, p. 1856; June 1, 2004, p. 1697.
Chicago Tribune, January 3, 1993, p. 3.
Christian Science Monitor, January 20, 1993, p. 13.
Commonweal, May 8, 1992, pp. 22-24.
Financial Times, September 16, 2002, James Haldane, "Reversibility, etc.," review of *Love, etc.*, p. 4.
Independent, July 13, 1991, pp. 34-36.
Journal of Literature and Theology, June, 1991, pp. 220-232.
Kirkus Reviews, November 1, 2002, p. 1585.
Knight-Ridder/Tribune News Service, March 28, 2001, Steven Rea, review of *Love, etc.*, p. K6406.
Library Journal, March 15, 1996, p. 98; June 1, 2004, p. 128.
London Review of Books, June 22, 1989, p. 20; February 11, 1993, pp. 18-19.
Los Angeles Times Book Review, March 17, 1985; November 8, 1992, p. 3.
National Review, August 30, 1999, Roger Kimball, "Faux Britannia," p. 48.
New Republic, April 2, 2001, Dale Peck, "Literature's Cuckold," review of *Love, etc.*, p. 32.
New Statesman, March 28, 1980, p. 483.
New Statesman and Society, June 23, 1989, p. 38; November 13, 1992, pp. 34-35; January 16, 1996, pp. 39-40; June 4, 2001, Jason Cowley, "Blame It on Amis, Barnes and McEwan," p. 36.
Newsweek, April 29, 1985.
New York Review of Books, March 21, 1996, p. 22.
New York Times, February 28, 1985; March 30, 1987, p. C16; July 5, 1990, pp. C11, C15; April 16, 1996, p. B2; May 11, 1999, Michiko Kakutani, "England As Theme Park, with Doubled Everything," p. E7.
New York Times Book Review, March 10, 1985; December 13, 1992, p. 3; April 21, 1996, p. 12.
New York Times Magazine, November 22, 1992, pp. 29, 68-72, 80.
Observer (London, England), April 18, 1982, p. 31; July 7, 1991, pp. 25-26.
Publishers Weekly, November 3, 1989, pp. 73-74; February 19, 1996, p. 204; April 12, 1999, review of *England, England*, p. 54, December 23, 2002, review of *In the Land of Pain*, p. 60; May 10, 2004, review of *The Lemon Table*, p. 33; August 9, 2004, review of *The Lemon Table*, p. 47.
Review of Contemporary Fiction, fall, 1999, Philip Landon, review of *England, England*, p. 174; summer, 2001, Philip Landon, review of *Love, etc.*, p. 167.
Spectator, January 26, 2002, Alberto Manguel, review of *Something to Declare*, p. 46.
Sunday Times (London, England), June 18, 1989, p. G9.
Time, April 8, 1985.
Times (London, England), March 21, 1980; October 4, 1984; November 7, 1985.
Times Literary Supplement, March 28, 1980; April 23, 1982; January 6, 1984, pp. 4214-4215; October 5, 1984, p. 1117; January 19, 1996, p. 24.
Tribune Books (Chicago, IL), April 21, 1996, p. 3.
Village Voice Literary Supplement, November, 1989, p. 5.
Wall Street Journal, December 11, 1992, p. A10.
Washington Post Book World, March 3, 1985; November 15, 1992.



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Yale Review, summer, 1988, pp. 478-491.

Yomiuri Shimbun/Daily Yomiuri, April 2, 2001.

Online:

Julian Barnes Home Page, <http://www.julianbarnes.com/> (August 4, 2004).

Salon.com, <http://www.salon.com/> (May 13-17, 1996).*

Source:† Contemporary Authors Online, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Source Database:† Contemporary Authors Online



Reading Group Guide

Spotlight on: Arthur & George

Reviews:

Booklist Reviews: January 1, 2006

Starred Review Barnes paid fictional homage to Flaubert more than 20 years ago, and now, in his grandest and most pleasurable work to date, he channels the voice of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The beloved creator of Sherlock Holmes, Doyle was also a spiritualist and an advocate for justice, which led to his involvement with George Edalji. The son of a Scottish mother and a Parsi father, a vicar in Staffordshire, George is bullied at school, and even after he becomes an impeccably correct solicitor his family is viciously harassed. Finally, George is accused of mutilating a pony. Convicted on bogus evidence, he is sentenced to seven years in prison. For Arthur, trapped in a prison of guilt over his wife's long illness and his unconsummated love for another woman, George's case is a liberating cause. Arthur quite enjoys putting the deductive reasoning that distinguishes his fictional hero, Holmes, to work to remedy this blatant miscarriage of justice. But George and his predicament prove to be baffling. Writing convincingly from each man's point of view, Barnes portrays two very different yet equally intense individuals who revere order and reason but entertain persistent fantasies. Marshaling extraordinarily keen psychological and cultural acumen, Barnes turns this historically based tale of prejudice, malevolence, and madness versus honor, stoicism, and ingenuity into a brilliantly incisive and emotionally powerful inquiry into the nature of delusion and hope, perception and interpretation. Sir Arthur has never been more movingly portrayed, and George, whose case served as a catalyst for establishing the Court of Appeals, is simply astonishing. (Reviewed January 1 & 15, 2006) Copyright 2006 *Booklist* Reviews.

Library Journal Review: November 1, 2005

As all Sherlockians know, in 1906 Arthur Conan Doyle took on the case of George Edalji, a reserved young lawyer, half Scottish and half Indian, who was wrongly accused of mutilating animals—and in the process helped set up Britain's Court of Appeals. Perhaps it is not so surprising that the author of *Flaubert's Parrot* would choose to reconstruct not just this case but the lives of both participants; what is surprising is the almost deadpan way he does it—and that his approach works so well. Barnes tells the life stories of Arthur and George with almost clinical precision, alternating between them from school age on. The storm gathers slowly; one learns the details of the mutilations and how the case was built so incongruously against the upright and deeply myopic George, even as Arthur is whiling away his time as famed writer and romancer of Miss Jean Leckie. The book picks up like a whirlwind when Arthur and George meet at last; and though a few early passages can seem a bit leisurely, it finally make powerful sense to see how these men arrived where they did. A beautifully modulated work; highly recommended. [See Prepub Alert, LJ 9/1/05.]—Barbara Hoffert, *Library Journal*

School Library Journal Review: June 2006

Adult/High School -This novel tells the tale of two real men: Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, creator of Sherlock Holmes, and George Edalji, an English lawyer of Indian descent. Their lives crossed when Edalji asked Doyle for help following Edalji's unjust conviction for mutilating horses. The narrative moves toward that point, which is in many ways merely the framework that allows Barnes to develop the interior stories of two unusual figures in Victorian and Edwardian England. His Doyle is a latter-day knight-errant, with all the failings and foibles one might expect; Edalji is the model Englishman with an inherent faith in the legal system and race is something that he cannot imagine could matter. Barnes has created two fully realized characters, and readers cannot help but sympathize with them. -Ted Westervelt, Library of Congress, Washington, DC

BookPage Review: January 2006

At the beginning of the last century, a half-Indian, half-Scottish solicitor in provincial England was tried and convicted for the unlikely crime of mutilating a pony. Released after serving three years of a seven-year sentence, the innocent young man wrote to no less a personage than Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. The world-famous creator

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Spotlight on: *Arthur & George*

Reviews: (continued)

of Sherlock Holmes looked at the evidence (or lack thereof) and made it his personal mission to prove that the verdict had been not only wrong, but grossly unjust. His efforts would eventually lead to a sweeping change in the way criminal convictions could be appealed in Britain's courts.

From this small slice of nearly forgotten legal history, the ever-versatile Julian Barnes has fashioned a capacious, probing new novel. Using the raw material of this notorious miscarriage of justice as its springboard, *Arthur & George*, a finalist for the Man Booker Prize, explores the confluence of the lives of two radically different people: one a self-assured and accomplished man who relished his public success, and another who lived contentedly outside the public arena until circumstances thrust him into the limelight. As their largely separate, briefly conjoined stories unfold, Barnes offers a subtle look at issues of self-identity, societal assumptions and individual truth pitted against institutional indifference.

Though he would never see himself in that light, George Edalji is what even forward-thinking Edwardians such as Conan Doyle call a "half-caste." His father, a Parsee born in Bombay, is an Anglican priest, his mother a Scot. In the small village of Great Wyrley in Staffordshire, there is a long-festering resentment about this mixed marriage, but the Edalji family is blissfully unaware of these sentiments. A good, if not stellar, student, George is a serious, somewhat timid boy with no friends among the local boys. As an adult, he returns to the vicarage to live with his family after qualifying in the law, and is happy enough until a series of strange crimes against local livestock is pinned on him using questionable evidence and specious testimony.

Outwardly, Arthur Conan Doyle is the antithesis of George. His relationship with his alcoholic father is as bad as George's with his father is good, but he rises above these messy beginnings to become a doctor and, more notably, a best-selling writer. Whereas George will never marry, Arthur marries twice, carrying on a complicated, decades-long platonic relationship with his future wife while he waits for the first to die. He is a robust sportsman, a world traveler, the consummate English gentleman through and through. And, of course, his skin is white. But Arthur and George share something that Barnes never makes explicit, leaving it to percolate beneath the surface of the novel. Of mostly Scottish and Irish descent, Arthur professes to be not quite English, though the adoring public would disagree, while George fancies himself English to the core, but is viewed by his parochial neighbors as something not quite English at all.

The men themselves never identify this bond. In the greater scheme of things, their affiliation is a passing moment, they don't even meet until well into the novel. One could argue, for instance, that while Arthur's intervention clears George's record, it doesn't really do anything to change the solicitor's life. And though the investigation gives Arthur purpose after his first wife's death, it is really just a footnote on the writer's vigorous and colorful résumé. The real effects of this unconventional pairing are left for the reader to discern, for Barnes is not merely resurrecting an interesting episode, he is rendering the inner lives of these two men.

Writing in a prose style appropriate to the period, Barnes has crafted a narrative that is driven forward by its own momentum. George's trial unfolds with chilling, Kafkaesque inevitability (and recalls Dr. Aziz's not dissimilar legal ordeal in Forster's *A Passage to India*). Arthur's systematic inquiry into the injustice, carried out with trusted sidekick in tow, is worthy of his own fictional detective's adventures. But *Arthur & George* draws its lasting power from something more than good storytelling. It is a timeless, beautifully told rumination on an essential question of identity, of how we see ourselves, how others see us and how the way in which we deal with these often incompatible perceptions can come to shape our destinies. —Robert Weibezahl is author of the novel *The Wicked and the Dead*. Copyright 2006 *BookPage* Reviews.



Reading Group Guide (3)

Spotlight on: Arthur & George

Reviews: (continued)

Kirkus Review: October 1, 2005

British author Barnes's deeply satisfying tenth novel, based on a turn-of-the-century cause célèbre. In 1906, Arthur Conan Doyle, the renowned creator of Sherlock Holmes, was roused to passionate indignation on behalf of a sedentary and extremely near-sighted lawyer named George Edalji, who was disbarred and imprisoned after being convicted of mutilating farm animals. Doyle's investigations—which lifted him out of the despondency occasioned by the death of his first wife—confirmed that the Edalji family had long been a target of police persecution. Doyle's widely read articles and petition to the Home Secretary offered new evidence of Edalji's innocence and suggested the identity of the actual criminal, resulting in the overturning of Edalji's conviction, his re-admission to the bar and the establishment of the Court of Criminal Appeal. As enthralling as Barnes's fictionalized account of these events is, with its satisfyingly morbid Victorian elements—the anonymous threats reprinted here verbatim, the dead birds strewn on the Edaljis' lawn, the vicar's odd practice of locking his son in his bedroom every night well into adulthood—detection is only one component of the novel. The author also respectfully narrates the parallel lives of two Victorian gentlemen: George Edalji, whose Apollonian downfall was to trust too much in the rationality of his fellow citizens; and Arthur Conan Doyle, who, when logic took him only so far, made the great Dionysian leap into spiritualism. Like his favorite writer, Flaubert, Barnes is a connoisseur of middle-class normalcy, which he chronicles with loving attention to the peculiarities of bourgeois life subsumed under its sheltering cloak of good order. His past novels have been praised for their brilliance but occasionally faulted for a dry style overburdened with detail. Here, with a mystery at the heart of the narrative, every detail is a potential, welcome clue. The precision of the style suits the decorum of the period and serves to underline the warm, impulsive generosity of Doyle's support, which saved an innocent man from ruin. A triumph. First printing of 100,000 copies Copyright *Kirkus* 2005 *Kirkus*/BPI Communications. All rights reserved.

Publishers Weekly Review: November 1, 2005

Arthur is Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, physician, sportsman, gentleman par excellence and the inventor of Sherlock Holmes; George is George Edalji, also a real, if less well-known person, whose path crossed not quite fatefully with the famous author's. Edalji was the son of a Parsi father (who was a Shropshire vicar), and a Scots mother. In 1903, George, a solicitor, was accused of writing obscene, threatening letters to his own family and of mutilating cattle in his farm community. He was convicted of criminal behavior in a blatant miscarriage of justice based on racial prejudice. Eventually, Sir Arthur ("Irish by ancestry, Scottish by birth") heard about George's case and began to advocate on his behalf. In this combination psychological novel, detective story and literary thriller, Barnes elegantly dissects early 20th-century English society as he spins this true-life story with subtle and restrained irony. Every line delivered by the many characters—the two principals, their school chums (Barnes sketches their early lives), their families and many incidentals—rings with import. His dramatization of George's trial, in particular, grinds with telling minutiae, and his portrait of Arthur is remarkably rich, even when tackling Doyle's spiritualist side. Shortlisted for the Booker, this novel about love, guilt, identity and honor is a triumph of storytelling, taking the form Barnes perfected in *Flaubert's Parrot* (1985) and stretching it yet again.

Reading Group Guide (5)

Spotlight on: *Arthur & George*

Summary:

Caution! It is likely that the following reading guide will reveal, or at least allude to, key plot details. Therefore, if you haven't yet read this book, but are planning on doing so, you may wish to proceed with caution to avoid spoiling your later enjoyment.

The discussion questions, topics, and suggested reading that follow are intended to enhance your group's conversation about *Arthur & George*, Julian Barnes's moving account of the intersection of the lives of Arthur Conan Doyle, world-famous writer of the Sherlock Holmes stories, and George Edalji, a Birmingham solicitor imprisoned for dreadfully gruesome crimes.

Julian Barnes brings his unparalleled narrative and investigative skills to the story of two men born in Britain in the late nineteenth century. Arthur, the son of an improvident father and an intelligent, capable Scottish mother, trains as an eye doctor, but becomes instead the famous creator of Sherlock Holmes and Doctor Watson. George Edalji is the son of a Scottish mother and a Church of England vicar who was born a Parsee in Bombay. And here, in his racial difference, lies George's problem.

From his earliest school years he has been jeered at by farm boys and the local police. Highly intelligent, straitlaced and conscientious, George becomes a solicitor and writes a book about railway law of which he is very proud. But minding his own business does him no good: when a series of animal mutilations brings terror to his local village, George is the only person pursued by the police. On trumped-up evidence he is convicted and sentenced to seven years' hard labor. After three years he is released but not cleared of guilt, so he cannot resume his working life. In desperation, he writes to Arthur Conan Doyle, who brings to his aid all of the investigative know-how of Sherlock Holmes.

With *Arthur & George*, Julian Barnes re-creates the detailed world of the Edwardian past, and with extraordinary empathy and imagination invites readers into the relationship between two men whose paths would never have crossed but for a terrible miscarriage of justice.

Discussion Questions:

1. One of the first things we learn about George is that "For a start, he lacks imagination" (4). George is deeply attached to the facts, while early in life Arthur discovers the "essential connection between narrative and reward" (12). How does this temperamental difference determine their approaches to life? Does Barnes use Arthur and George to explore the very different attractions of truth telling and storytelling?
2. What qualities does the Mam encourage in Arthur? How does Arthur's upbringing compare with George's? What qualities are encouraged in George by his parents? What does the novel imply about one's parents as a determinant in character development?
3. To what degree do George's parents try to overlook or deny the social difficulties their mixed marriage has produced for themselves and their children? Are they admirable in their determination to ignore the racial prejudice to which they are subjected?
4. Critic Peter Kemp has commented on Julian Barnes's interest in fiction that "openly colonises actuality, especially the lives of creative prodigies" (*London Times*, 26 June 2005). In *Arthur & George*, the details we read about Arthur's life are largely true. While the story of George Edalji is an obscure chapter of Doyle's life,



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Spotlight on: Arthur & George

its details as presented here are also based on the historical record. What is the effect, for the reader, when an author blurs the line between fiction and biography, or fiction and history?

5. From early on in a life shaped by stories, Arthur has identified with tales of knights: "If life was a chivalric quest, then he had rescued the fair Touie, he had conquered the city, and been rewarded with gold...What did a knight errant do when he came home to a wife and two children in South Norwood?" (60). Is it common to find characters like Arthur in our own day? How have the ideas of masculinity changed between Edwardian times and the present?

6. George has trouble believing that he was a victim of race prejudice (235). Why is this difficult for him to believe? Is it difficult for him to imagine that others don't see him as he sees himself? Does George's misfortune seem to be juxtaposed ironically with his family's firm belief in the Christian faith?

7. The small section on pages 79-80, called "*George & Arthur*" describes an unnamed man approaching a horse in a field on a cold night. What is the effect of this section, coming into the novel when it does, and named as it is?

8. Inspector Campbell tells Captain Anson that the man who did the mutilations would be someone who was "accustomed to handling animals" (84); this assumption would clearly rule out George. Yet George is pursued as the single suspect. Campbell also notes that Sergeant Upton is neither intelligent nor competent at his job (86). What motivates Campbell as he examines George's clothing and his knife, and proceeds to have George arrested (102-7)?

9. George's lawyer, Mr. Meek, is amused at George's sense of outrage when he reads the factual errors and outright lies in the newspapers' reports of his case (119-20; 122-23). Why is Mr. Meek not more sympathetic?

10. George's arrest for committing "the Great Wyrley Outrages" (153) causes a sensation in England just a few years following the sensational killing spree of Jack the Ripper that sold millions of newspapers throughout England. Are the newspapers, and the public appetite for sensational stories, partly responsible for the crime against George Edalji?

11. How does Barnes convey the feeling of the historical period of which he writes? What details and stylistic effects are noticeable?

12. England was extremely proud of its legal system; Queen Victoria had expressed her outrage against the injustice in the trumped-up case against Alfred Dreyfus, which had occurred a few years earlier in France. Yet the Edalji case seems to present an even greater outrage against justice, and again because of the race of the accused. Why might the Home Office have refused to pay damages to Edalji?

13. For nine years, Arthur carries on a chaste love affair with Jean Leckie. Yet he feels miserable after the death of his wife Touie, particularly when he learns from his daughter Mary that Touie assumed that Arthur would remarry (215-17). Why is Arthur thrown into "the great Grimpen Mire" by his freedom to marry Jean (220)? Why does he believe that "if Touie knew, then he was destroyed" (267)? Has he, as he fears, behaved dishonorably to both women? What does the dilemma do to his sense of personal honor?



Reading Group Guide (7)

Spotlight on: *Arthur & George*

14. Why is the real perpetrator of the animal killings never identified? In a *Sherlock Holmes* story the criminal is always caught and convicted, but Doyle gets no such satisfaction with this real world case. How disturbing is the fact that Edalji is never truly vindicated and never compensated for the injustice he suffered? Does Barnes's fictional enlargement of George Edalji's life act as a kind of compensation?

15. *Arthur & George* presents a world that seems less evolved than our own in its assumptions about race and human nature, and justice and evidence, as well as in its examples of human innocence and idealism. Does this world seem so remote in time as to be, in a sense, unbelievable? Or might American readers recognize a similar situation in a story like Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*, or more recent news stories about racial injustice?

16. The story ends with George's attendance at the memorial service for Arthur. What is most moving about this episode?

(Page numbers refer to the USA hardcover edition, and may vary in other editions.)

Suggested Reading:

Andrea Barrett, *The Voyage of the Narwhal*

Geraldine Brooks, *Year of Wonders*

Joseph Conrad, *Lord Jim*

Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes and Memories and Adventures*

E. M. Forster, *A Passage to India*

John Galsworthy, *The Man of Property*

Rudyard Kipling, *Kim*

Rohinton Mistry, *Family Matters*

Colm Tóibín, *The Master*

W. G. Sebald, *Austerlitz*

Daniel Stashower, *Teller of Tales: The Life of Arthur Conan Doyle*